

Who Writes Wikipedia? — Responses

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First, on a personal note, let me simply say thanks. I probably put more work yesterday's post than anything else I've ever written. In addition to the research I describe, I've spent my free time the past few weeks going over the text of the article again and again, agonizing about the proper phrasing, getting everything just right. It was definitely worth it. My sincere thanks to everyone who made it possible.

Getting down to business, many are interested in pursuing this line of quantitative research. The work I did was intended for an article, not a formal paper, and while I'm fairly confident the basic principles are correct there's plenty more work to be done.

I was heartened to discover research by Seth Anthony which, independently and more formally, came to largely the same conclusions. [As he explained on Reddit](#): "Only about 10% of all edits on Wikipedia actually add substantive content. Roughly a third of those edits are made by someone without an account, half of someone without a userpage (a minimal threshold for considering whether someone is part of the "community"). The average content-adder has less than 200 edits: much less, in many cases."

One of the more interesting things Anthony did was look at the work of admins in detail. In his sample, he noticed that none of the genuinely substantive edits were done by official site admins. He found that when admins originally joined the site, they contributed a lot less frequently and consistently but created a lot more substantive content. After they became admins, however, they turned into what Anthony calls "janitors".

One of the wonderful things about Wikipedia is that literally all of the data — every single edit and practically every discussion made on or about the site — is easily available. So there's an enormous amount more to learn about how it gets written. (In addition to nailing down what we know so far a little better.) If you're interested in contributing to further research on this and related topics, [send me an email](#) and I'll try to coordinate something.

Another response was to think about the implications on who gets to vote in Wikipedia elections. 'I tried to vote,' [commented Eric](#), 'but since I am one of your "occasional contributors" (I've edited only one article to make content changes), I am not eligible[]'. It appears that the opinions of "occasional contributors" will not be heard.' Others, including William Loughborough and Jason Clark, expressed similar sentiments. 'HURRAH, I am DISENFRANCHISED', [complained Bill Coderre](#).

But by far the most common response was people sharing their experience trying to contribute to Wikipedia, only to see their contributions be quickly reverted or rewritten.

'You can definitely tell the "regulars" on Wikipedia', [joshd noted](#). 'They're the ones who ... delete your newly reate[d] article without hesitation, or revert your changes and accuse you of vandalis[m] without even checking the changes you made.' 'Every modification I made was deleted without any comment', [complained CafeCafe](#). 'I know there are a lot of people like me willing to help, but unless there is a real discussion behind, I won't waste my time to help anymore which is a sad thing.'

[bowerbird complained](#) that 'my contributions ... have been warped by people who merely want to "make it sound like an encyclopedia" without having any knowledge of the topic' while [Ian](#) 'got fed up of the self-appointed officious jobsworths who [rewrite your] things [to] fit "their vision" My time is too valuable to argue with these people...'

[Bill Coderre told](#) of how he wrote entire articles from scratch, only to see them ruined 'by some super-editors, who removed content, and turned what I thought was gosh-darn good writing into crap. ... These people, by and large, "edited" thousands of articles. In most cases, these edits were to remove material that they found unsuitable. Indeed, some of the people-history pages contained little "awards" that people gave each other — for removing content from Wikipedia.'

And it seems like half of all the people I meet have a story about being listed for deletion and the nasty insults that ensued. Seriously, there have been numerous times I've said something about Wikipedia to a relatively well-known person and they responded back with a story about how someone insulted and deleted them. '[T]here are culture vultures overlooking Wkidpedia waiting to kill anything that doesn't fit the norm', [wrote Mediangler](#).

Why does this matter? Why should we listen to the angry complaints of random people on the Internet? If occasional contributors are the lifeblood of Wikipedia, as the evidence suggests, then alienating such people just can't be healthy for the project. As Ian wrote, 'if we are to invest our valuable time contributing some expert knowledge on some subject, we want to know that our work will remain there for others, and not just keep getting reverted out in seconds by some control freak that knows nothing about the actual subject. ... your article proves the exist[e]nce of this "inner gang" that I feel are actually holding Wikipedia back. To allow Wikipedia to grow and really pick the brains of the experts around the world, you need to do something to break up this inner gang and the mini empires they are building for themselves.'

Perhaps we can improve things with new rules (not only should you [not bite the newcomers](#), you shouldn't even bark at them) and new software (making it easier to discuss changes and defend contributions), but most importantly, it's going to require a cultural shift. Larry Sanger famously suggested that [Wikipedia must jettison its anti-elitism](#) so that experts could feel more comfortable contributing. I think the real solution is the opposite: Wikipedians must jettison their *elitism* and welcome the newbie masses as genuine contributors to the project, as people to respect, not filter out.

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